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Submission for the 2016 4S/EASST conference, track 064 “Valuation practices at the margins”

Resilience in the “technical dialogue” of French nuclear risk governance

Short abstract

This paper addresses the issue of articulation between anticipation and resilience strategies through the lens of valuation theory. We draw on the case study of the “technical dialogue” that governs nuclear risks in France, to qualify how resilience values are included in this dialogue.

Long abstract

Articulation between anticipation and resilience strategies for risk management is increasingly problematic (Wildavsky, 1988). Risky activities are masked by organizations, whereas risk governance practices such as audits seem imprisoned in formality. We draw from a Deweyan perspective in which dangers are managed through valuations (Dewey, 1929), such that anticipation and resilience are merely valuations differentiated by their temporality and relation with dangers (Dewey, 1939).

Our paper seeks to specify how values related to resilience are included in valuations of the “technical dialogue” of French nuclear risk governance, in which a safety demonstration built by a nuclear operator is evaluated by the Radioprotection and Nuclear Safety Institute (IRSN). We collected documents and interviews to understand valuations of “technical dialogue.” To track values related to resilience in the dialogue, we did ethnographic fieldwork in a risky activity hidden by the organization in which it unfolds.

Results show that values associated with resilience (identified through the ethnographic study) are included in “technical dialogue” valuations to manage uncertainties related to projects evaluated. Uncertainty (Gross, 2010):

- prompts IRSN actors to investigate the planned sociotechnical system’s resilience, and
- leads the nuclear operator to disclose information that may harm its credibility.

With the help of valuation theory, our results suggest that resilience could be included in formal arrangements oriented towards anticipation. Lastly, we discuss the capacity of institutions to adapt the formality of the “technical dialogue” to cope with ineradicable uncertainties.